

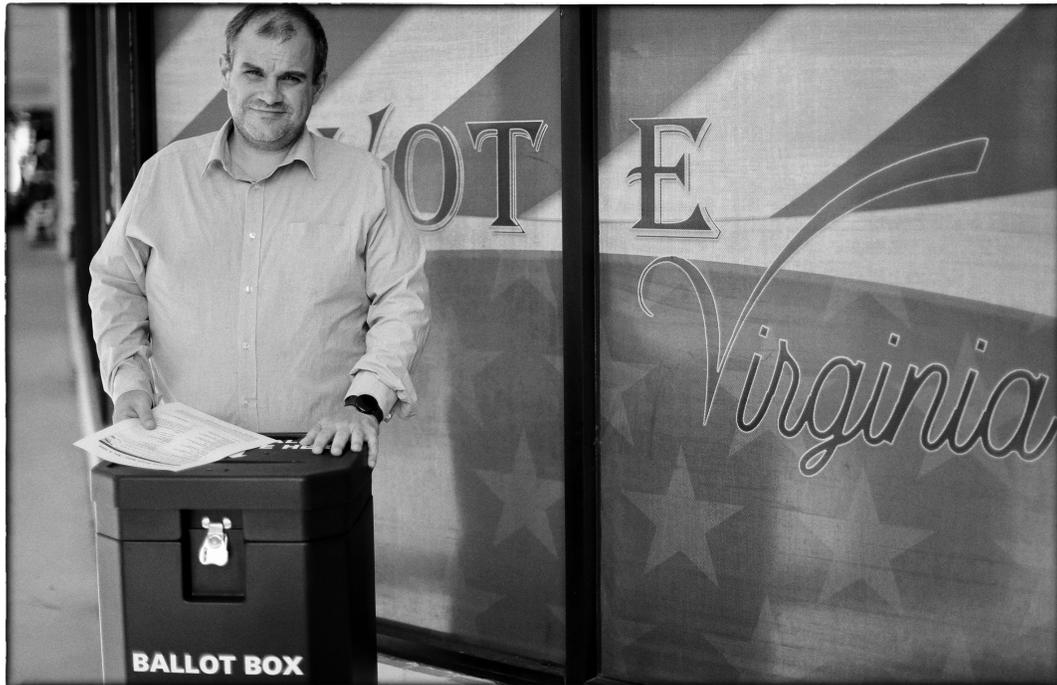


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A Virginia Registrar Keeps The Wheels Of Democracy Turning

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York County voter registrar Walt Latham stands behind the county's ballot drop box. Photo by Roger M. Richards // VCIJ at WHRO

Walth Latham

The year-round job of keeping Virginia's annual elections running like clockwork falls to local officials who work to stay above the political fray.

BY RYAN MURPHY

WHRO

In York County, the wheels of democracy turn all year long, nestled between a coin-operated laundry and a pizza place.

In voter registrar Walt Latham's modest strip mall office, he and a small staff recently pored over the latest drafts of this year's ballot.

The 47-year-old registrar said they're now on their third version. First, someone left off a suffix on one of the candidates' names. Then, the state certified another presidential candidate late the previous Friday, so they'd had to add Cornel West's name.

The office was preparing for early voting, and Latham's turning to yardwork to keep his cool. "I already feel a little frantic, which is why I was cutting grass this weekend, and it was nice and relaxing," Latham said.

The next few weeks will become increasingly frantic and fraught for Latham, other voter registrars and their staffs.

Across the country, elections officials have come under attack by Republicans who promote false claims of a stolen 2020 presidential election and question the security of American elections. Since the last presidential election, Virginia has implemented annual audits to ensure electronic voting systems are accurately tallying votes as well as investing in more security training for elections officials.

Still, the anger and hostility toward election workers in the once-sleepy offices of voter registrars has hit hard in rural Virginia.

In Buckingham County, the registrar and her staff made news by quitting in protest last year after Republicans assumed control of the county's electoral board and [started spouting baseless election fraud claims](#).

Others have been [hounded, threatened or fired](#).

“You have people who are wondering about it and wondering if they can trust the system. And I think that they come into it - a lot of people come into it - with the assumption that elections are very straightforward and simple,” Latham said. “They are, but they aren't.”

Latham said the heat hasn't risen to that level in York County, but his office has had its share of run-ins with irate voters. One man claimed Latham's staff was conspiring against him because he didn't read information about redistricting he received in the mail.

He's had to head off people who are “messing with the staff” in the office and they've asked people to leave when they've been disruptive.

“You have some people who come in agitated, or overly politicized or have an agenda, and I don't think that helps. It doesn't help. It doesn't help the staff. It doesn't help the other voters who are here,” he said. “I'm not developing an ulcer over people who are not going to do their part to be part of the process.”

Latham's been the registrar in York County since 2008, following a short stint in the Hampton Public Defender's office after he graduated from William & Mary Law School.

But he's been helping run elections since before he could vote. He volunteered as a poll worker for June primaries in 1995, months before he would turn 18.

“I was told by someone I got to know at the Department of Elections... (I) was probably the youngest officer in the state,” Latham said.

The young York County boy had always had an interest in history and government and politics, something he says was partly influenced by his

upbringing around the critical American History of Virginia's Peninsula.

If that wasn't enough, he also dons revolutionary-era garb to play the Yorktown town crier a few times a year.

But Latham says when you go back to 18th century American history, the job he's doing now wasn't intended to help every kind of person cast their vote. In the old days, there was a registrar for every precinct, which meant lots of part-time patronage jobs, typically for some influential person's wife.

"You would have to go to people's houses to register to vote, you'd have literacy tests, things like that. And back before the Civil Rights era, ... you can imagine, just based on my understanding of things, if you were a black citizen going to register to vote, at a little white lady's house, the racial politics of that," Latham said.

"I don't think we had a democratic system until the 1960s. You could say that's a blot on America, which it is. But it's also just looking over the span of history and seeing the improvements. It makes me very proud to be an American. And the system's not perfect, and I don't know that any system is perfect. But it hopefully becomes more perfect as it goes along."

In the modern day, Latham said the registrar's role is to stand apart and above the fray of politics.

"It is a job beyond just being one person. It's a trust; a public office as a public trust."

At least, that's the ideal.

He was told he needed to have thick skin when he took the job. Latham said he doesn't like to keep that armor up but sometimes he has no choice.

Latham says seeing the dedication of those poll workers - working long hours on Election Day for little pay, like he did when he was 17 - reaffirms his choice to jump from practicing law to running elections.

York County has grown from 42,001 registered voters when Latham started in 2008 to 52,436 today, according to the state Department of Elections.

There's a lot left to do before Election Day - stuffing envelopes to mail out thousands of absentee ballots, registering the steady trickle of voters who wander into the strip mall office, training poll workers who will be responsible for precincts on the big day.

And then there's the counting. And sometimes, the recounting — which Latham said registrars are told not to even say, lest they jinx the election like saying the king's name backstage at a production of MacBeth.

“This job is something that people depend on and it's an important job,” he said. “I don't have to cure cancer, I don't have to do anything else. I'll feel like I've accomplished something if this is all that I do for the rest of my life.

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